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## Rialto Theatre sign gets reprieve

Preservationists worry that support for the South Pasadena building might crumble.

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The sidewalk is closed to pedestrians in front of The Rialto Theatre on the 1000 block of Fair Oaks Ave. in South Pasadena. (Raul Roa / Staff Photographer / March 14, 2012)

By Adolfo Flores, [adolfo.flores@latimes.com](mailto:adolfo.flores@latimes.com)  
March 22, 2012 | 6:21 p.m.

It appears the historic blade sign hanging in front of the Rialto Theatre will survive a safety scare that arose last week, but preservationists and city officials are worried about more than just the sign. They are concerned their efforts to revitalize the moribund 87-year-old theater may crumble like the exterior of the building, which is held together in places by wire mesh.

On Thursday, representatives of Landmark said they have decided to repair the sign and are in the process of hiring a contractor.

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"The elephant in the room is the question of what's next?" said Scott Feldmann, president and chief executive of the South Pasadena Chamber of Commerce. "What's going to happen to the Rialto now that we saved the rusty old sign?"

The South Pasadena Fire Department closed the Rialto for safety reasons in 2010. It has remained closed ever since.

Last week the city closed off pedestrian access underneath the Rialto's 34-foot neon sign on Fair Oaks Avenue, out of concern it was weakened by recent windstorms. The city also placed a support structure under the sagging marquee.

While Landmark has pledged to fix the sign, Interim City Manager Sergio Gonzalez said officials have been disappointed with the company's apparent lack of interest in the Rialto.

"We're obviously concerned about the lack of detail and follow-through from both the lease holder and property owner," Gonzalez said. "It's a building that's a landmark in the city and a reflection of the city."

The Rialto opened in 1925 and was acquired by Dominick Jebbia in the 1930s. He put it in a family trust in 1950, where it remains. Landmark, which operates first-run theater complexes around the country, holds the lease until 2024.

Landmark officials and representatives of the Jebbia family did not return calls seeking comment.

The Rialto is on the National Register of Historic Places, and the blade sign is considered a defining feature. South Pasadena officials are concerned that any changes to the sign could affect the building's historic standing.

The chamber, Friends of the Rialto and the city are hoping to collaborate on a long-term plan to reopen the theater, with Landmark and perhaps the help of a nonprofit or a major donor.

"I'm not sure how to go about finding a millionaire who loves theaters, though," Feldmann said. "The Rialto is the most obvious unpolished jewel that we have. That's why we're so intent on getting it opened."

Landmark, Feldmann added, "is busy running their new business model that doesn't have anything to do with running a historic theater."

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**mypapa** at 5:20 PM March 23, 2012

Hmm, how much do the Preservationists think it will cost to rehabilitate the building?  
Perhaps that should be publicized in attempt to raise funds. What happens to the money

collected if you can't raise enough to save the building? How much have the preservationists contributed of their own money?

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**FriendsoftheRialto** at 10:30 AM March 23, 2012

This is very good news, because until yesterday Landmark appeared to be taking a "hands off" approach. They are now pledging to do the right thing with the blade sign, not just the fastest, cheapest option.

Proof is also in the way they dealt with the sagging marquee. The city did not place a support structure underneath it as reported in this article. Landmark hired a contractor, got the required permits, and actually fixed the sag, pushing it back up and rebolding it. This was not a temporary job of shoring it up, they did the right thing and FIXED it.

As for the future of the Rialto, we are working on it right now! Friends of the Rialto is able to accept fully tax-deductable donations through our fiscal sponsor, the Pasadena Arts Council. With these funds we are hiring Historic Theater experts who will develop a business plan based on successful historic theaters in operation around the country. Yes, this will take time, a lot of work, and money, but we have the community behind us, and a supportive city. This has been done in other communities, we can do it in South Pasadena! For more info, please visit our sites or email us:

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